DRUM
BLACK LITERARY EXPERIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

THE DRUM, WINTER 1975

Vol. 6 No. 1

Editorial, circulation and advertising offices located at 426 New Africa House, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass. 01002.

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December, 1974

DRUM

Cover Photo, Pg. 18, Clement Roach

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EDITORIAL

As the period of the mid-seventies meanders its way through lurid transitions i.e., recession, inflation, congressional scandals etc., we, as black people discover ourselves in the position of having to define and justify the types of cultural actions that surfaced in the past 100 years. These independent, indigenous and festive activities created by the "masons" of the cultural movements subjected Black Americans to an enormous variety of ideas, values and images which tended to oppose the western aesthetics' paragon.

During the early periods, negative stereotype, racist examples of negritude such as "Porgy and Bess," and "Buckwheat and Farina" of the "Little Rascals" existed and contended simultaneously with the more realistic, cultural endeavors and writings of Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, and Langston Hughes. However, images like "Amos and Andy" and the "Birth of a Nation" served to overpower the more intellectual and truthful experiences of the black man and re-inforced him and the white public's opinion with the image of the shiftless, watermelon eating, eyeball rolling, mindless idiot. The perpetration and perpetuation, of this self-concept is a direct cause of a present condition that still plagues the black masses. It is not unusual to view some black people still romanticizing like "Amos and Andy" and "Sapphire." These preconditions further re-inforced our extreme vulnerability of being influenced by "negative fads," and this phased out many meaningful attempts of establishing indigenous forms for black people. A "negative fad" example could very well be the effect of the "Superfly ethics" on the Black concious.

However, the intent of this issue is not to define the faults and dilemmas that we are plagued by, rather to present some personal insights and rationales developed by different individuals whose quest for dignity has forced them to superannuate the negative conditions and thus attempt to communicate their ideas to the black masses.

The format of this issue attempts to illustrate some of the beautiful images which otherwise would be deemed ordinary because of our present conditioning. The beauty in the poetic phrase, the contour line of a photograph of an individual's face, the emotions instilled in a writing, the personality and icon exhibited in a piece of fine art, in effect, the sum total of a variety of different approaches with one commonalty, the pursuit of the concept of what is beautiful. And the ability and pride in being able to identify ourselves and our aesthetics. Therefore, we sincerely hope that you enjoy this issue in every sense of the words "Black Aesthetics, the Quest for Black Survival . . ."

POEM FOR MR. ELLINGTON

The Duke of Smooth
From the jungle of the Cotton Club to the World
From Soda Fountain Rag
Through My People
To New Orleans Suite,
A legacy of mad love for us
We too love you
Can't help but to.

Meistro of Charm
In a Sentimental Mood of Solitude
I found that my granddad knew you well
Grandma too, but she wouldn't tell.

Dad took Mom to see your late smoke
Residue from the fire of hot
Headed for the pennicle of the swing.

We only got to dig you once, my wife and I
We came with echoes in our ears of years gone by.

You eased on stage in mello style
Gave a gentle nod
A knowing smile
The "A" Train pulled out
And you played a while
Poured us vintage '37
Uncorked in '73.

How could I say in one lifetime
How great you've been through three.

The Duke of Smooth
From the jungle of the Cotton Club to the World
From Soda Fountain Rag
Through My People
To New Orleans Suite
A legacy of mad love for us
We too love you
Can't help but to.
I thought I knew
Before I took your Caravan
Through a Warm Valley
Of Passion Flowers
And Flamingoes
As a Prelude to a Kiss
Or
Came out of a Black and Tan Fantasy
Or Mood Indigo
To have Great Times
In the Night Time
Rockin' in Rhythm
Or diggin' the C Jam Blues.
Composer of Composure
I can't name them all
But the blood of you chords
Flows through the present
As it did in the past
And shall continue
Through the veins of the future.
What was for Lady Day
Is For Mingus, Roach and Sheppe To . . . day
And shall be for the music to . . . be.

Mungu Kimya Abudu

Reflections on Writing

An Interview with Sonia Sanchez

by Irma McClaurin

Sonia Sanchez was among the vanguard of black writers in the sixties who emphasized a new direction for black poetry. These writers asserted a love of self and culture in stepping towards a positive black identity and sought to demask the democratic illusion that America had created. They also developed a new aesthetic of which they refused to have biased white critics' standards imposed upon their work.

The predecessors to these writers in the sixties were diverse: Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, some of whom chose to write totally in the European tradition. Others utilized European forms but maintained a content that was black, while still others were renovators of black art and chose to go back to the Afro-American folkroots for their form and content. It is within this same folk tradition that many poets of the 60's wrote. They turned towards the black urban areas for its diverse folk material and for their audience.

These young black writers of the 60's were often criticized for utilizing improvisational techniques (Jazz forms) in their writing. They managed to capture the rhythms of black speech patterns and incorporate them, but more importantly there was evidence of a conscious social and political awareness in their work.

The response of America and her "hatchet critics" was understandable, but most devastating was the response of black critics and artists. Many of them assumed that white critics took the correct position, allied themselves with the negative criticism of the new black poetry and attempted to tailor their works to fit the criterion of the white critics.

The negative criticism from these black and white critics were generally cries of propaganda, which seemed to emphasize rather than dispel the notion that this new writing was a threat. In fact, prior to this new renaissance, America had said in 1963 of Gwendolyn Brooks: "that I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware that he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important." [1] In 1974, the same America has said of Sonia Sanchez: "that to hear Sanchez's flat, measured, controlled tones . . . is to hear not the imflammatory but the concluded, a hatred bent to work . . ." [2] There is an inability on these critics' part to distinguish between rage and hated. ("Hating" is a sustained emotion requiring a great amount of time.)

Black artists refuse to take this time away from their work in order to hate.

Neither is there hesitation on the part of these same critics when they accuse many black writers of not being universal. But what many fail to realize, and particularly black critics and artists who agree with this concept, is that in this country "universality" has come to mean those things embodying white middle-class values. Yet, one must realize that *no art* arises out of a vacuum. There is no existing art that does not have some specific cultural or class orientation.

And so, the implied question in such criticisms of Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez and others is which comes first: one's blackness or art? But the question is a superfluous one since the black experience cannot and does not exist independent of an artistic form. Only when artists of oppressed minorities begin to explore *positive* self images is there a negative reaction. This is from a failure to understand that the emphasis upon blackness in African-American art expresses a historical struggle: Blackness is not only a reaction to whites, but attempts to establish a balance that is a positive assertion of African-American culture. Gwendolyn Brooks' poems do not lack universality, nor are Prof. Sanchez's work obsessed with hatred—controlled or otherwise. Their work is merely an expression of self-love and an acknowledgement of a diverse black experience.

The following interview is with Prof. Sonia Sanchez, currently acting chairperson of Black Studies at Amherst College. Prof. Sanchez has written numerous volumes of poetry *(Homecoming, We a BaddDDD People, Love Poems . . .)* six plays (Sister Son-ji, The Bronx is Next? . . .) and countless essays and articles. We shall attempt to focus on illuminating the development of black poetry since the sixties and the validity of that era.

McClaurin: Could you discuss your involvement with the black arts movement in the 60's?

Sanchez: When we began to "poet" in the 60's, we were involved with teaching a people who did not believe that they were black. We were teaching a people who did not believe that their hair should be worn

naturally, teaching a people who did not believe that anything had happened to them or would happen to them. We were teaching them that they were still enslaved. If you can understand the audience that we had, then you can understand the "simple" poetry that some of us wrote.

Major criticisms have been leveled against those poets who wrote didactic poetry. It was said that they were not skilled writers, but if you really read them, you'll see this is untrue. If you understand what it is to be a poet from a tradition of eastern and African poetry, you'll see that we are talking about writers who "pull the coats" or "covers" off a society to allow a people to see and understand. We were responding in our writings to the needs of the times and it was what we said and the manner in which we said things that was criticized.

We used curse words in our works and people had no idea why. But we used these words because when we first read poetry, no one listened to us, if you can understand that. At one time Imamu Baraka, Ed Bullins, Marvin X and myself gave a reading in a community and only 20 people, if that, attended. So we had to work to attune our small audience to poetry.

If we had come out with elaborate poetic forms, we would never have gotten people to listen. So we had to write some lines that people would understand and hear. We put our poems into the vernacular of people "in the streets." This is the same way that other poets use dialect.

The reason America praises the old dialect is because it is her image and idea of what black people are. The reason she didn't like our dialect is because she doesn't like the black masses. She labeled our work "street" poetry. But it is far from that. What our work did was respond to certain kinds of idioms familiar to black people. We noticed that people listened to children who would say "I be", so we would say "I be" and have instant communication with our audience. Because black people's ears were attuned to music, to the beat, quite often our poetry took on an oral quality with improvisation.

Of course people assumed that because you wrote poetry like this, you did not write other kinds of poetry. But in the 60's you had to write a certain way in order to be heard, in spite of the other kinds of poems that were inside you. But the criticism against us was the same kind spoken against John Coltrane and other musicians: their music was not great because it was not written down. And as black people, we have to be careful because we listen and say "that's right", adopting the same attitude that America does: that if there is no "formal" training, something is not good.

Yet poetry can only be weighed by the response to it and a year later the same group of writers I mentioned earlier had a reading in Oakland that drew over 3,000 people. Now the people were not only responding to the expletives but also the ideas and messages that came afterwards. That was a real response..

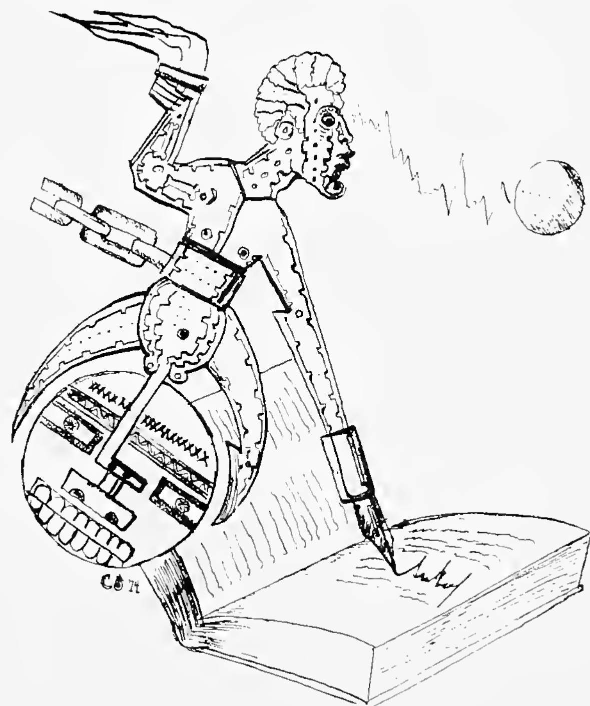
McClaurin: In retrospect, how do other artists respond to the writing of the 60's?

Sanchez: Well, now the 70's is about redefining the 60's. Many would-be writers or other writers of that time looked at our work and said, "Oh I can do better than that", and perhaps they could have, but we were fulfilling an apparent need that had been neglected by many black poets at that time. There was a need to show/teach things and set certain goals and directions for Black people.

In the 70's, there are many black poets with no idea about what went on, who will say that the poets of the 60's were not *good* poets: they were not technicians, they were oral poets and didn't really write well or they screamed and cursed a lot. But they fail to realize that a lot of innovative things occurred. We stretched out words, we placed words differently on paper. We actually began to use music in terms of poetry; we began to sing. In the 60's we made it possible for people to come to an auditorium and sit down to listen to poetry, so the writers following us (black and white) have a ready-made audience. In a sense we determined the direction for writing.

If you look at young poets now, you can see a movement toward "didactic" poetry. You hear young Chinese writers saying: "I am," You have the young Chicano and Puerto Rican writers saying: "I am," That comes from people in the 60's who said: "I am Black, now deal with it."

McClaurin: Would you say that black writing has developed since the 60's and do you see a shifting of priorities from an emphasis on didactic writing to an emphasis on craftsmanship?



Sanchez: In answer to your question on development, if you write a certain way in the 60's you are not going to write the same way in the 70's, if you're a good poet. You respond to the times. If people in the 60's didn't realize they were black and you told them, there is no sense repeating the same in the 70's. So of course your writing and its emphasis changes. This is evident in many writers of the 60's, if you *read* their books.

Also, when people in this country talk about didactic poetry they assume it suffers from a lack of craftsmanship and I disagree. I think when we talk about craftsmanship we have to ask ourselves: are we talking about people who write, people who write well, people who know how to write in various forms, or people in the world of academia? Of course there were some terrible poets writing with us in the 60's, but there are terrible poets writing at any time.

But I think its important to note that it was not by chance that we were followed or had agents in our classes; we must have been doing something *right*.

Now, coming full circle to the 70's, people are saying that's not true anymore. Presently, we are begining, to elevate those writers who say nothing political or about being black. For these writers I say "you're entitled." Who am I to say that someone shouldn't write in a certain way? But I come full circle again to understanding what a "true" poet is, and a *real poet is one who does not entertain but one who teaches.*

McClaurin: What would you say is the difference between white critics' attitudes now and in the 60's? I ask this not because what they think is so important to understanding the work, but because many black writers and critics take their analysis seriously and adopt similar stances towards the "new black poetry" without being aware of what it was all about.

Sanchez: White critics didn't really comment on black art in the 60's because they knew they would be pounced on. However, America is about redefining us now as a people, as poets, and other things, so they think they can comment now. The recent article on Broadside Press in the New York Times Book Review is an example. A white girl felt she could really analyze our poetry and tell us who the good poets were at black Broadside Press.

Our poetry in the 60's was about reality. The poems were about the present and the future, and if the past entered into it, it was to show how we had been enslaved. Obviously, our poetry was untouched then, because we actually put it out there and said, "don't touch it!"

But now we have some interesting poets coming up who believe that white poets and critics can do them justice, which these critics have done. However, these black writers don't understand that their circumstances are similar to Charles W. Chestnutt when his book, *The Marrow of Tradition*, was reviewed by the dean of critics, Howell. All he could say was the book seemed bitter, not that it shouldn't have been bitter, but it would have been better if it hadn't. Yet if you read the book you'll see it's not bitter at all. Howell was content to give Chestnutt good reviews as long as the man moved the way Howell expected. The problem with white critics now is the same. It's cool as long as you move in the tradition they want you to move in. Since they couldn't criticize our work then, they labeled it "hate" poetry. Also black critics were doing the same thing.

McClaurin: Could you elaborate on this idea of "hate" poetry?

Sanchez: I think in the 60's all poets who wrote militant poetry were called "haters." Looking back, I believe anything showing America in a bad light was called "hate" poetry and that's what we did. We were told our work was terrible and that the curses were vulgar and did not constitute poetry. But you see poetry can be anything. The words "and" and "but" are not poetry, but if they are placed accordingly to mingle with other words they become part of a poem like our curses did.

I think it's important to note that to call someone a name or point out their wrongs doesn't mean you hate them. I would like to stress the point that I don't take time to hate. In the 60's and presently, my emphasis was and is on us loving ourselves and our people and learning what we are about. Because of these conditions I had to make mention of the people who oppressed us. Therefore, in order to balance that, America said that there was hatred in Black writing.

McClaurin: Do you have any concluding remarks?

Sanchez: I would say that in spite of the kind of a poet you are, on one level, you must understand that one don't have to attack someone to be a poet. If you want to be a singer, go ahead but you ain't got to sell your soul; if you want to be a writer, go ahead but you ain't got to sell your soul. This is not the time to attack blacks because we all are going to be attacked enough during the Seventies, our new Reconstruction!

It is certainly a time for unity and a time to come together, moving together in a concerted effort towards acquiring some kind of freedom and justice in this country. There should be an understanding among us that we are all moving towards the same goal and even if we take different roads, that goal is still going to be there. And we can walk it together. I am ready. How about you, my Brother and Sister?

1Louis Simpson, *New York-Herald Tribune*, cited in Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1973, p. 7.

2Helen Vendler. "Good Black Poems One by One." *The New York Times Book Review*, September 29, 1974, pp. 10 and 14.

Since you know music,
Let me put it this way, chump:
C Sharp or B flat.

Larry Darby

The Quest for Black Aesthetics' Survival

The History and Development of The Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts and The National Center for Afro-American Artists

by Carolyn Bolling

When it was agreed upon that this particular issue of Drum magazine would be entitled Black Aesthetics—Black Survival, without further deliberation, I choose Ms. Elma Lewis; founder and director of the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA) and the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) for my initial project. Although this valley is fortunate enough to claim such cultural giants as Archie Shepp, Max Roach, Diana Ramos, Sonia Sanchez, Reggie Workman and countless others, it would be utterly impossible to overlook or exclude Ms. Elma Lewis and the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA) from the aforementioned list. In fact, the majority of the artists cited, have been frequent guests at the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA). Moreover, these artists have remained actively engrossed in projects of concern, affiliated with the development and different modes of Black Artistry.

To those who are unfamiliar with Ms. Lewis and her School, it may be hard for them to conceive that nearly twenty-five years ago in a barren, six-room dwelling in Roxbury, a new birth; a new awakening in the Black Art Discipline had already begun to unfold and take form. With only four teachers of art, drama, music and dance at her disposal, a battered second-hand piano, and a group of twenty-five students who paid a small fee of $5 for monthly tuition costs, the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA) was launched into reality. Ms. Elma Lewis is recognized as a teacher, administrator, lecturer, director, choreographer, writer and a constant heart-beat in the Black community.

Born in Roxbury in 1921, around Dudley Street, of recently immigrated West Indian parents; Elma Lewis was reading by the age of three and she (as well as her two older brothers) were greatly influenced and inspired by both parents. She proudly states: "My mother was education-oriented, my father art-oriented." Perhaps, because of these factors and her early cultivation and appreciation of the arts; she best understood the vital need/importance for the preservation of Black Art Expression and dedicated her life to campaigning for its survival.

Today, the National Center of Afro-American Artists (founded in 1968) serves as the umbrella organization for the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA) and remaining cultural components. Undoubtedly, Elma Lewis has waged a lifetime struggle to regenerate the Black Arts Cultural Movement. Accompanied with a staff of 125 dedicated professionals conducting 350 classes weekly, an overall population of 575 enrollees (400 children, 175 teens and adults), the NCAAA also has over twenty allied programs in the arts serving community schools, agencies, colleges, universities, museums, penal institutions and businesses throughout the state. With this vigorous workforce under her jurisdiction, Ms. Lewis beams and declares that she maintains the largest collection of talents and brains of any organization, black or white and has built a rapidly growing institution committed to serve the Black community at large while exposing the riches of a race to all people. Presently, the NCAAA is housed in a former Jewish synagogue and is submerged in the very depths of the Black community. The NCAAA has firmly established Ms. Elma Lewis as a nationally known figure from coast to coast and she defines her imposing Center as such: "It is where we, the Blacks, are stating Black heritage and are illustrating the beauty of our arts to all people".

In short, the ELSFA under the auspices of the National Center of Afro-American Artists is composed of a number of variegated professional outlets designed to enhance/develop the potential and creativity of the young artist. Consequently, when a student is first enrolled in the NCAAA he/she is offered beginning instruction in dance, drama, art, costuming, sewing, music and music theory. It is mandatory that each incoming student partake in a cross-section of cultural units (as mentioned above); until the enrollee has decided to channel his/her energies into a

designated art discipline. Only after the individuals have been exposed to all fashions of art, are they encouraged to specialize. The NCAAA says of the Black Child: "He has had to overcome the obstacles of a society ill-prepared to accept the richness of his cultural heritage. We Celebrate! The Black Child's strength, endurance, and self-determination which have enriched the quality of life in the Black community and made lasting contributions to the progress of the writer, the businessman, the celebrity. The Black Child is all Black people, young and old, for we are the children of Africa". One goal that everyone at the Center has in common is that they are anxious that the children identify positively with their heritage, and that they uphold and acknowledge the confidence they receive at the school and hopefully they may incorporate these experiences into their adult lives.

Furthermore, being a long-time resident of Roxbury and former student of ELSFA, I have frequently attended the NCAAA on a number of occasions. More recently, upon entering the lobby of the NC AAA my attention was immediately averted to a steady stream of energetic youths about to receive instruction from Babatunde Olantunji; (the renowned Nigerian drummer) who also conducts classes in the drums of Africa, Jazz workshops and African Heritage as well. As I proceeded down the carpeted, brightly-colored corridor, I was invited to survey a gathering of youngsters enrolled in a course in costume/dress design taught by two well-noted professionals in the field; Gus Bowen and Lucy Cordice. Bursting with creativity, these students did not hesitate to display/model their unparalleled, pacesetting fashions often worn in major theatrical productions at the School. Also as part of this program, the youngsters make their own design, and ultimately they will make their own patterns to sell on a commercial market basis. In addition, the students are monitored in basic design and presented practical job training for young seamstress/tailors from Ms. Pearl Allen, an acknowledged seamstress in her own right. As Lucy once stated about her advanced class, "Nobody has ever told these kids that they can't do everything, so they think they can do anything."

It is hardly less deserving to note the achievement of the multitude of dance companies emersed throughout the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA). Clad only in leotards and bubbling with activity, these young budding artists have unlimited access to a variety of dance companies such as: Tally Beatty (choreographer of modern dance), Billy Wilson (offers instruction in classical, Afro-Carribean dance, ballet manager of the Company and director of School teaching program), and George Howard (primitive dance instructor at the school.) A four-year Rockefeller Foundation grant of $300.000 supports dance instruction and choreographic workshops to develop additional companies. As a result, the NCAAA maintains a myriad of dancing companies that enables the young artist to fathom the ethnic, jazz, as well as the classical vogue of dance expression.

Likewise, it is important to note still another vital aspect of the ELSFA which is the art department. First, courses in art at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts are taught in conjunction with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which offers the young apprentice a ceaseless gulf of artistic expression. Those registered in the art training discipline are also introduced to chalk, paint, textiles, sculpture, graphics, ceramics, and photography. Versatile Barry Gaither (art historian), is director of the deeply rooted forum for Black Art, which has originated the development of a museum/gallery (open to the general public) housed in the NCAAA. The Center's museum has already acquired a representative collection of Black Art, some of the outstanding Black artists that have displayed their works to the community have been: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Horace Pippin, Charles White and Hale Woodruff.

In addition, the theater department at the NC AAA gained national prominence from the execution of the production "Black Nativity" a dramatic exhibition (by Langston Hughes) of gospel songplay which strikingly discloses a Christmas story, that blended with it poetry, dance, and gospel music in rhythmic patterns. This production was filmed by Black Journal and seen by ten million prospective viewers. The main emphasis in the theater department is to cultivate diction and delivery. The Center affirms that nothing helps a student become self-expressive as well as drama and that the theater can indeed be instrumental in instilling self-confidence. Publicity for the "Black Nativity" production was written as follows: "This is Black Art: to be creative and innovative within tradition . . . to be syncopated, everchanging, like jazz, life and Black people themselves".

Equally important is the **Elma Lewis Playhouse in the Park** which offers free entertainment for community folks and guests, every night from July 7 through Labor Day. It was in the summer of 1968, when 200 students from the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts (ELSFA) sauntered over to Franklin Park and performed "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on the site of a burned out firehouse. This marked the inception of Elma Lewis's Playhouse in the Park. Until this day, it has survived as a tradition and a secure

platform for talented artists to "pour out" their resources upon the receptive community. Besides acting as a pulpit of expression for neighborhood artists, it has also attracted such distinguished celebreties as: Duke Ellington, Boston Pops Symphony Orchestra, Count Basie, Billy Taylor Trio, Mongo Santamaria, Billy Thompson, Jaki Byard and the Silver Star Steel Band. The above are only a mere few of the irreplaceable artists who have donated their time and creativity to the betterment/advancement of Elma Lewis's Playhouse in the Park and the National Center of Afro-American Artists (NCAAA).

Likewise, a unique program of instruction introduced by the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts was designed to provide inmates with job skills in the technical theater at Norfolk Correctional Institution. Academicians from the School have scheduled classes twice a week and instruct approximately 105 inmates in technical theater, and the purification of music, dance, and art. Entitled the Technical Theater Training Program, it has produced four plays since its inception in July 1970. The two plays, a musical and a ritual were original works by inmates at Norfolk. In sum, all works are acted, composed, choreographed, danced, and designed by inmates themselves, who also handle all technical and stage crew work. One aim is to provide concrete skills that the men can utilize upon their release. The inmates themselves succeeded in producing "The Plague", a play concerning drugs, that was written by one of the inmates. One prisoner simply stated: "This is the first time I ever did anything on my own that was constructive. I really enjoyed the training in this program". Furthermore, a group of ten men involved in the theatrical-training program have also written and compiled an anthology of poetry, short stories, and plays entitled "Who Took the Weight?", published by Little, Brown and Company. One true mark of achievement occurred when inmate/playwright Insan Sauti (Robert Preston) won first prize in the playwriting category of the Barbwire Theater Literary Awards Project for his literary piece; "Installment Plan", (printed in the Norfolk Prison issue of Drum).

More recently, the NCAAA has been chosen by the American Revolutionary Bi-Centennial Commission in Washington and Bobker Vision Associates of New York as the national representation of "the symbol of the art made meaningful in current history" for a half-hour documentary film. This is the major film of the Federal Bi-Centennial Commission and is scheduled to be premiered on a thousand television stations across the country. Eventually the film will be heavily distributed as a short subject in movie houses all over the country as well as overseas. As conceived by writer/producer/director Lee Bobker, this film is designed to give focus to the National Bi-Centennial Program and its major theme. Titled "We Hold These Truths," the film is executed in three segments following the Bi-Centennial theme . . . Festival, Heritage, and Horizon. The NCAAA will comprise the entire Festival section as a symbol of how one individual's (Elma Lewis) personal committment and effort brought about a forceful change.

Furthermore, although the NCAAA has evolved into a $1-million-a-year operation, the two-part $950,000 Ford Foundation grant to the NCAAA was indeed "a milestone" in the life of her school, which has had to fight an "uphill financial battle all the way". The first of its kind ever given to an inner-city cultural institution, the grant will spearhead a $5 million capital funds endowment drive. This funding that the NCAAA has furnished, will help achieve other goals, which Elma Lewis describes as follows: "We believe art should provide the underpinnings for richer, more beautiful, and more profitable lives . . . Art should also have educational and political values too . . . We believe we are setting an example to the rest of America".

Ms. Elma Lewis alone has received over 100 national and international awards for her tireless efforts. Already, Ms. Lewis has grander expectations in regards to the progress and achievements of her School. She sees her Center evolving into a kind of national repository and archive for Black Aesthetics, a place that would have serve to validate and propagate Black cultural achievement much the way institutions such as the major museums and orchestras do for Western culture. For Elma Lewis, the Arts have certainly proved to be an effective tool for encouraging pride and dignity. Without question, she invests tremendous faith in the power of the arts and readily states: "Restore a man to dignity and he will be all right. Let him know he is a creator, not just a creature, and he will achieve".

Good-bye Daze of Yestayeah
or (i thought i never could say good-bye)

Good-bye daze of yestayeah
when we had to
flush our faces
down toilet bowls
everytime the teecha talk about:
"HIS-STORY o' de KNEE-GROW"
and raps us up in his own word - SLAVE-VERY

Good-bye daze of JAY-BRA
ROYAL CROWN
&DUKE greaseless POMADE
pushin down our heads
while we MASS-turbated
to the rhythmic thrusts of Elvis' guitar

Good-bye daze of yestayeah
when our went mad brandin their brains
deglorifying their flesh
& Dixie peachin demselves to death

Good-bye daze of nights with Jayne MANS-FEEL
Jean HARLOT
& MERRY-LAND Monroe
cause we've found our Black woman and she AINT JEMOMMA
SAP-FIRE
or BEULAAAH

Good-bye daze of Bach over Bird
Mozart over Mingus
& Shakespeare over Sanchez
when our heads were spinnin in a COLD-CHURED MU-SICK whirl

Good-bye daze of yestayeah's
here-os - like that
super-slick honky
handlin deadly hardware &
half naked hores

Good-bye daze of yestayeah
Good-try daze of yestayeah
Gotta-fly daze of yestayeah
and all the while
i used to sing
"i never can say
good-bye".

Larry Darby

Part I of Acceptance
(Dedicated to Ralph Ellison and the forces of Invisibility)

i am invisible

no where is my birth recorded
nor my name mentioned
my image has not yet been captured
    on screen or canvas
in fact, i can't find it on the
      mirror's surface
and yet i know that as i say what i have,
to remember i can remember my thoughts
and recall vividly the pain inflicted from
    within and out
i am and must have been
    yet i remain invisible

I, me, not seen.
  not seen when I was bathed in the color of my mother's mother
    working the land that had spawned
                kings/queens/warrior gods/and
                maidens' dreams made real and of
                men and children
  not seen at the dusk of dawn praying
  chanting happily the songs of the earth/the crops/
    those before us and those to follow
  not seen swimming/dancing/laughing/and/crying at the
  course of events which marked a life of one interwoven
  in a family/clan/village/in Africa.

I, me, not seen
when i was betrayed and bartered for the bullet that
found its way to my father
that forced my mother to claim the passions of the MAD,
to wander along the roads of the interior to the exterior
chanting in the tongue of the barren the songs of hell
that ended the possible extension of my father's and
mother's dream of giving me more brothers and sisters
I me, not seen.
when I assumed my most famous role on the block of auction
as an immoral darkie prancing naked-impatiently awaiting
to be bought
undressed by hands whose color was nowhere close to mine and
forced by a whip to stand in the market
defiled and descrated
under the banner of life, liberty and the pursuit
I, me . . . not seen
not seen emancipated after the war
I was still here chains, lashed back, and all
waiting for 40 acres and a mule
waiting all the time waiting
for what? a house burned? to be called nigger?
THE GREAT AMERICAN DREAM?
I, me . . . not seen
not seen when i entered the promised land of the north
didn't know i was here 'till i overheard some white man
say nigger the way northern people do
you know nig**ga**/and/nig**ger**
no promises up north. not for us at least
no jobs and plenty of name calling
in the north niggers ain't lazy they are irresponsible
and their women ain't bitches they is whores
no grace save us
no nothing . . .the north ain't nothing
I, me, wasn't seen
when i marched and sang on the right key
WE SHALL OVERCOME
WE SHALL OVERCOME
when i sang
when i stood in front of the lincoln monument
when i cried when johnny got shot . . . i cried especially
hard when they played back his
REMEMBER NOT what america can do for you
but ask what you can do for
who who johnny who
who can do what for who

I, me, wasn't seen
when i shouted BLACK POWER
started hoping my sons would be Nkrumahs and Malcolms
not little john-johns,
when i stopped speaking english
and started wearing no clothes clothes
when i stopped ultra-pressing and started afro-sheening
I, me. . . wasn't seen
when I became superfly's woman
and took a lead role in sounder
when i became a super woman, a super whore a super intellectual
a super black a black super black
I ain't no agent!!!!!
I, me . . . wasn't seen
when I was here
and moved there
when i did this and that
when i was
I, me . . . wasn't seen
is not seen
won't be seen for awhile

I am invisible
nowhere is my birth recorded
nor my name mentioned
my image has not yet been captured
on canvass or screen
in fact i can't find it on the mirror's surface
and yet I know that as I say what I have said
and recall vividly the pain inflicted from within and
out
I AM and MUST HAVE BEEN

Tenajol Cormier

. . . Internalize the love we have for ourself

The truth in your eyes
reflects the warmth in heart
Rays of reality are reflected in
the **clear** line of your black face

Richard Griffin

"Public Art" — The Aesthetics of the People

An Interview with Nelson Stevens

by Rich Thompson and Ron Alexander

In recent years, the University of Massachusetts has developed one of the best staffed Black Studies departments in the country. Black artists, and Black scholars, all of whom nave made contributions (minor or major) in their respective fields, are attracted by the University's immense resources and facilities. A visitor to The New Africa House would be awed by the name planks on the office doors: Max Roach, John Bracey, Julius Lester, Ester Terry and a host of other craftsmans and researchers who are noted purveyors of Black art and thought. The building is a living museum.

Nelson Stevens, an artist presently on the UMass. faculty, is considered by many students, colleagues and admirers to be one of the most talented and outstanding painters in America. His colorful and experimental paintings can be found in both private and public collections. But more than for his paintings, he is hailed for the murals he has either created or directed students in executing. The imposing murals of Nelson Stevens can be found on the side of the Black United Construction Workers' Union in Boston, 884 State Street and Mason and State Street in Springfield.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on May 26, 1938, Stevens majored in Advertising at Mohawk Valley Community College in Utica, New York. After graduation, he worked with an advertising firm for a year. Dissatisfied with that work, he returned to college and earned a B.F.A. from Ohio University and a certificate in education. His experiences as an educator in a middle school proved to be fulfilling. He was able to evoke and guide the fresh, creative impulses of his students, impulses that have been traditionally destroyed or stifled by insensitive teachers. Many of his students achieved scholastic distinction and awards.

Although he found his involvement as an educator satisfying, there was little time to concentrate on his artistic work. He left the public school system and went to work in the Cleveland Museum of Art where he began a concentrative study of the **great works.** His ambition was to understand the inner dynamics, the structure, the form, the finer and less obvious techniques used by the artists: "What makes this a great piece of art?"

It was after he left the museum and completed graduate work at Kent State University that his role as a Black artist unfolded. He joined **Africobra**, a group of artists working collectively with the ideal of creating art for the enjoyment and education of Black people. **Africobra** also strived to make their art easily accessible by instilling a sense of community ownership in their works thus ignoring the Western paragon of "priceless art." If art is truly for the appreciation of humanity then it must be affordable, Stevens agrees. Art, as the history of Europe indicates, can very often become elitist, in that the rich are the sole possessors. In many ancient African societies, art was community owned, much like the concept of land; creating for the rememberance of the dead, the survival of the living and for the life of the future. Africobra upheld this as the essence and mode of Black art.

Stevens came to see that images are not just what one sees in a photograph. In a painting of drums he did from a photograph, he went beyond the visual image to show the physicalness of the drums, the potential of rhythms and beats, raging hands and emotions. "What I concentrated on is not only the image but the rhythms of that image."

"I start from the small to make the large, and hopefully I can build enough layers of content to make a piece full, rich and potent." Rhythms and images are essential parts of a picture. In a piece of art, one should be able to explore and find something different in every viewing. In that sense his work can be compared to the varying levels of pitch and tone in a musical composition. These levels can be defined by the bass, drums, flute, saxophone, piano, the individual sounds or syncronization. These rhythms can be found in his work.

Art, as Stevens sees it, should not only be beautiful but encapsule a message; a vision, concept or idea which can enhance living. The didacticism of art is what makes it a vital part of human experience, the tradition having its roots in Africa where art is ritualized to celebrate all social interactions. "If it's just beautiful and there's no message and it's not executed properly, people will not respect what you have done."

However, it is through murals that Stevens feels that his art comes full circle. "Murals are designed to deliver messages in visual imagery and are an attempt to beautify a community, a means of reflecting the life styles of a people. An ideal way of communication, murals, more than any other form of art, comes close to the community achieving ownership of this form of art. The work is there, hugh and demanding, and the people of the community can appreciate the aesthetic without restraint, individually or collectively."

"Cities weren't built with beauty or Black people in mind. The landscape reflects a preoccupation with industry. Stevens feels that murals can be used as a beautifying element and adds vibrancy and color to the cold steel and cement. "There is a starvation of Black images," says Stevens.

The images in his murals are filling. Nelson further fulfilled these ideals over the summer when he formulated and directed a program to create 4 murals funded by a U.Y.A. grant (Art 74). In the 1st mural of this program he depicts six Black women in struggle, inspired by a poem, *I AM BLACK WOMEN, by* Mari Evans. In a mural that was done under his direction by a M.F.A. student, Clement Roach, on Sherman and State Street in Springfield, a Black family is pictured with the mother and father protecting the children from a negative element—a pimp and his cohorts. Another M.F.A. student, Clyde Santana. executed a mural under Steven's supervision, projecting young Black people gaining the necessary skills for liberation. Finally was the mural on Mason and State Street entitled *THE GIANTS OF BLACK MUSIC*, which he collaborated with Santana to complete.

The possibilities of this artist are great and far reaching. He is a man of sensitivity, warmth and perception, committed to providing the kind of art which captures the imagination of Black people and moves them to higher levels of experiences.

The art of Nelson Stevens is free. Take a walk.

Tribute to Black Women
36 X 13

University Year for Action
Summer Arts' Program
1974

Winchester Square Wall
33' X 11

Artist Nelson Stevens

To Build a Nation
37' X 12'
Clyde Santana

Artist Clement Roach

Wall of Black Music
38' X 14'

Artists: Clyde Santana and Nelson Stevens

Recognizing that the least we can do is to leave our communities more beautiful than we found them, we have decided to do more . . . .

As image-makers, the evidence of what we are, is the creations that we fashion. We have been about the rhetoric of art for the people, but now, gradually the images themselves have come-through the mastery of the craft. We have tested and refined our craft and we have gained in number and in the intensity of our conviction.

We have accepted our own challenge to make our craft relevant. Some call them murals, others large paintings; but all know them as force fields activated in service for our liberation.

Our people are beautiful but our street environment is not. We are setting about to change that. We are stretching canvas of brick and concrete and galvanized steel to present our images that will inform and praise our communities.

These force fields can be crafted to bring unique distinction to a community while showing its connection to the greater African struggle for total liberation.

"Our walls are ours." They must represent our very finest efforts to build and develop our communities in order to restore our people to their total traditional greatness.

Nelson Stevens, 1974

Permission to Reprint. Archie Shepp, N.Y. Times.

Black Power and Black Jazz

by Archie Shepp, *Jazzman and playwright*

Shortly after World War II, over 50 per cent of the black people living in the United States were found to have moved from the rural south to the large industrial complexes of the North and Midwest. A substantial number had settled even farther west beyond the Rockies.

Most brought with them a few worldly possessions, the family Bible and an enormously rich musical heritage derived from Africa. Though they themselves had limited access to musical instruments, save an occasional upright or a guitar, they were able to pass on through religious songs and church records—the only authentic cultural experience this country has ever inspired, with the possible exception of the ritual of the American Indians.

More over, the provincial organ of the backwoods church could neither anticipate nor stay the cruel social and economic changes that would eventually upend religion as the traditional moral force in the black community.

Both the church and its historical ally, the family, foundered on the devastating rock of depression and two world wars. Black men returned home bitter and jobless to face in peacetime the same ignominious poverty they had always known. Indeed the American Dream appeared a nightmare, and the unfulfilled hopes of the Reconstruction a remote and carefully nurtured myth to a generation a hundred years removed. Not a few of America's black sons turned to dope (here I don't refer to marijuana) and crime as a last democratic response to an apathetic and unviable republic. Night life flourished as a necessary accommodation to this expanded social milieu.

Thus the black jazz musician, economically insecure just as the worker, made a similar trek north bringing with him the secular music of the streets, the language of hip and the lore of the bistros. One such man was Charles Parker, one of America's rare and seldom acknowledged geniuses. Mr. Parker, known to jazz devotees as Bird, was originally from Kansas City. He settled in New York in the forties after having traveled extensively with the Jay MacShann band. His biographers state that he had already been involved with heroin by the time he was 15, a fact no doubt attributable to the extensive vice that existed during Kansas City's notoriously corrupt Prendergast regime.

The music of Parker and his contemporaries (Monk, Gillespie, Kenny Clarke, etc.) ignited the spark of a renaissance in so-called jazz music Bird, the man, was reflective not only of an emergent identity among black artists, but a growing socio-political awareness, among Negros in general. Through Parker's music, the urbanization of the black man took on the added dimension of sophistication. This "sophistication" was in reality a realignment of values that would enable the Negro to deal with the specious hypocrisy of northern whites while at the same time maintaining his own sanity, or to put it another way, "Keep the faith, baby."

Parker's music found an eager audience in the cities, primarily among youth. The rootless, alienated existence of the young Negro was made timeless and universal by the magic of his soaring sound and rapid notes. The Existential was lent a new plausibility.

Then, in 1954, Bird died of pneumonia at the age of 35. To some, at least, his death seemed senseless, not a providential act, but a systematic, sociological murder for which there was a precedent. Men like Max Roach, and Sonny Rollins, Parker's erstwhile associates, began to involve themselves more directly in political action in order to change things. The black esthetic revolution now widened its scope to include its political counterpart. Roach's "Freedom Now" Suite was deemed so provocative that is was banned by the racist authorities of South Africa. Charles Mingus, well known bassist, invented titles like, "Fables for Faubus," and obvious reference to the school desegregation crisis of 1954. Moreover, the police action in Korea had released another bitter generation from the syndrome of world death. They were to return like their fathers, Sancho Panzas without portfolio, perennial accomplices to international crimes they neither caused nor condoned. The implacable fact would not yield to rationalization. A gook and a Nigger were interchangeable when the heat was off.

The urban black turned inward, became more taciturn. Was he really apathetic? Super cool? Or had Whites once again gratuitously misjudged the extent and potential of his political response to terror?

As the tempo of life increased, all art reflected the change. People walked faster. Notes were played faster. New hopes were born and, like the tall buildings of cities, they seemed to reach to the sky. The children of the previous generation were now grown up and were challenging the democratic process to provide solutions in place of academic inquiries. They were not going to be put off with the same old lies, not about to be hacked to death on their knees. Suspicious of Christianity out of an historical pre-disposition, they either rejected the old moral nostrums altogether, or re-interpreted the religious experience through Black Islam. The image of Buckwheat and Aunt Jemima which had persisted in the American mythology as stock types, were exposed for what they were: the absurd projection of an elaborate white fantasy.

The white world grew suddenly alarmed. In the midst of the Great Society a nation within a nation seemed to have developed. Not only was the black determined to be free; he was determined to be *black* and free. Watts exploded like a fat bloody watermelon all over America, and black youth were able to distill from the fierce cry and passionate urgency of John Coltrane's music the faint admonition of Max Roach: "Freedom Now."

Thirty years before, Benny Goodman had won acclaim from the white liberal establishment when he hired Teddy Wilson and Charlie Christian (both Negroes) to work in previously all-white clubs. But the benevolent patronage of well meaning whites, despite their intent, was beginning to wear a little thin to America's 20 million Negroes. A white "King of Swing" seemed to them as implausible and insulting as Tarzan and Jane in the Ituri.

Black power was the inevitable response of a people without power to a system which had grown fat and indifferent to the yearnings of the poor; a system whose ethic, at least, was still rooted in the institution of slavery; whose immense wealth and idyllic democracy had failed at this late date to provide even a black quarterback, or a single solitary Negro *billionaire*.

LeRoi Jones's Black Arts theater schools was an ambitious attempt to offset these shortcomings of democracy, and acquaint the black with the full portent of his historical role. Though the organization was plagued with difficulties from its inception, it represented a signal attempt by the black artist to combine his cultural and vocational aims into a specific political expression—not violence—but emancipation.

At the initiative of Mr. Jones, the first New Thing recording was done live at the Village Gate (**The New Wave in Jazz,** Impulse Records). This recording, led by the formidable John Coltrane, was a milestone in that it introduced a score of unknowns to the mainstream jazz audience, among them Grachan Moncur, James Spaulding, Charles Tolliver, Sonny Murray, Beaver Harris, Albert Ayler, and Archie Shepp. Critics such as Jones began to point out the relationship of the new music to popular rhythm and blues. The burgeoning mass consciousness of the black artist had evolved into a complete esthetic expression. "Soul" was its creed, and "brotha" its most constant reference of endearment.

Bird, Rollins, Miles, Monk,Trane, Roach, Clarke, Roy Haynes . . . were the immediate ancestors of a revolution, a new American Revolution. Its democratic message was hammered out in the intransigence of Elvin Jones's drum and the plangent sounds of the Trane's horn. Black youth found its kindred spirit in the new music and like Big George (an avid devotee of the Trane) they would shout, "git 'em Trane!" — in the sure knowledge that music works a magical power against evil. It was under the tutelage of the Trane that the so-called New Thing developed, but much of its conception was due to the innovations of Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman, its two founding fathers.

This new statement had been accused of being "angry" by some, and if so, there is certainly some justification for that emotion. On the other hand, it does not proscribe on the basis of color. Its only prerequisites are honesty and an open mind. The breadth of this statement is as vast as America, its theme the din of the streets, its motive freedom.

NAKATINI SERENADE

WE HAVE FASHIONED THE RAINBOW INTO GOLD
MADE ICE INTO A STAR FOR RINGLETS AND BRACELETS
FORGED FOG INTO MIRRORS OF GRACE
TO SEE THE BEAUTY OF OURSELVES

THE TIDE IS A RHAPSODY OF SPIRITUALITY
WORK IS PLEASURE
GREED IS SIN
LOVE IS IMMORTAL IMMORTALITY

WE TIP PEEP SEE TALE SHARE TRUTH
SO THAT OUR BABIES WILL BE KINGS AND KINGDOMS AND NATIONS
BECAUSE OUR LIVES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PURE

BILL HASSON

copyright 1971

(This poem is most appreciated when performed. Where parenthesis inclose parts of words, the sounds that those parts represent should be eliminated, but the full intention of the word should nevertheless be communicated.)

FOR THE GIFTED

Can't nobody stop somebody
In their becoming,
So you came to us . . .
The Prophet on wind and reeds.
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
Black genius
Pioneer of sound.
Ain't nobody's ax in this lan'
Can strike like yours, Loooord,
Can strike like yours.
". . .Let me in, let me in
I got somethin' to say
Some thoughts for the world
About a bran' new day . . ."
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
Black genius.
                    Before your time
                                In time with Universal sound
          Cuttin' through time on alto.
Mandrake!
Oooooouuuuu,
The Mandrig Speaks, The Panther Walks
                    with as impatient a gait
                    as a man who couldn't wait,
                    but did.

Yeeeesssss juuusssst steppin'.
One ax couldn't do it,
So you copped a flute and blew it
Long and smooth and your tunes flowed
like the Niger.
Like the Nile.
With the influence of the finest of tributaries.
Mingus.
Roach.
Coltrane.

You bounced notes off of Summer clouds at sunset
And we found out what love was
As the days passed
And we fell in love with the innocence of your
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
Black genius
God had blessed the child
And his youth was everflowing
Into new things
Searched for and found
The bass clarinet ain't never sounded so good
Thanks to the gifted who saw fit to bear gifts.
Endless
Endless
Endless
Endless contributions from a man
who was Glad To Be Unhappy
because, ". . .America put you down
when you tried somethin' new . . ."
Yeah brother,
Your music was gone . . . in the air
Couldn't put no chains on it
Or pin it down nowhere . . .
But, indeed, who appreciates a Genius Child.
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
(Bl)ack (gen)ius
Black Genius
Was
Mr. Dolphy.

Mungu Kimya Abudu

BALLAD *

(after the spanish)

forgive me if i laugh
you are so sure of love
you are so young
and i too old to learn of love.

the rain exploding
in the air is love
the grass excreting her
green wax is love
and stones remembering
past steps is love,
but you. You are too young
for love
and i too old.

Once. What does it matter
When or who, i knew
of love.
i fixed my body
under his and went
to sleep in love
all trace of me
was wiped away

forgive me if i smile
Young heiress of a naked dream
You are so young
and i too old to learn of love.

1968

*Sonia Sanchez, LOVE POEMS
(New York: The Third Press, 1973)

BLACK ANGEL

Having had no love
She didn't know how to give it
Said her man was more about material things
Having had no warmth she seemed so cold
She said nigger men made her that way
made her that of stone
I knew that there were moments when she was like that
of nile, knew that she had electrified
a hundred cold nigger men hearts into relating to
black love I-to-me-you-to-us love
But now she said nigger men were turning to
each other for electrification
That they seemed quite pre-occupied
I could only offer a hand of warmth
to reassure her that if she eased back
to black electrification, she'd find black
warriors to electrify
She smiled a smile of warm/ebony
Just then two nigger men came by relating
to each other again and again
She turned toward the sun and mixed
With its rays of another Life

Richard Griffin
1971

THE DRAMA of NOMMO
There is a Life Force

Life Force and Ritual Involvement

A definition discussion of theatre in the African continuum-drama for, by and of black people.*

1. Nommo-the life force
". . . . . there seems to be a force, power or energy permeating the whole universe. God is the source and ultimate controller of this force; but the spirits have access to some of it. A few human beings have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use it, such as the medicine-man, witches, priests and rainmakers, some for the good and others for the ill of their community."*

2. The individual who detaches himself from the spirit of the community, sacredly or secularly, cuts off the roots of his foundation, "his context of security, his kinships and the entire group or those who make him aware of his existence."*

3. "A ritual is a holy experience; you deal with a congregation or people. A ritual is a family affair. There is no such thing as a stage, no such thing as an audience; only liberators and participants. And you try to remove that psychic distance, that "nigger space" that separates Black people from each other. In a ritual you mold, meet and merge into one. You feel, laugh, cry and experience life together."*

(continued next page)

Ours is not a charming theatre. It is at times awesomely crude, yet spectacular, defined by those systems of, belief illuminated in the daily ritual of survival—not of the fittest, but of the entire community. Imbued in the life experience is a race memory which finds expression in our theatrical exercises. Alain Locke, correctly observed that the "finest function, then, of race drama would be to supply an imaginative channel of escape and spiritual release, and by some process of emotional reinforcement to cover life with the illusion of happiness and spiritual freedom." [1]

The spectacle of the black church indicates a survival of those traits which dramatize African communal rites. The event gains in dramatic fidelity, and thus in truth, when the spirit is liberated from the mundane self, and races through the pews barefoot and barebreasted, bearing the fruits of the imagination in naked reality. At once, we find manifest the poetry of the Word, with its modulations finding the outer reaches of the Banshi's cry and the lower depths of the Mississippi Gulf, urging the body through gestures that are rhythmically concocted to effect a change of the environment: the ritual is initiated by the Chief, the Medicine Man, the Rev, hooting and hollering, calling for responses that will magically validate the intimacy of shared understanding—the wisdom of collective Nommo—which now gains vigor; the gestures become more spontaneous, the song more exuberant, everyone is united around the spirit which has delivered the soul to a heightened awareness of reality beyond the hell gates of the suspended animation known as the *illusion* of life.

The aims of the black theater are inspired by a social ethic which is diametrically opposed to the presumed cultural hierarchy of the Western world, so esteemed by whites such as Martin Gottfried,[2] who obtusely criticizes the black theater experience for what he imagines to be a "restriction on content that deprives these writers of an independent existense as artists." In his confused liberal mind, no doubt having trouble fitting his feet into the GREAT WHITE FATHER'S boots, he is greatly agitated by the black theater artist's aesthetic preoccupation with black life, as opposed to the neuter experience of EVERYMAN, which former he regards as an obvious limitation. "It encourages propaganda and inevitably leads to agit-prop plays. Moreover, whether the style is naturalistic or cartoon, the plays invariably work out of ethnic mannerisms—the jargon, the gestures, the music of the ghetto. The black public is lured to this as a sophisticated theater experience when it is actually black mass-appeal entertainment, reinforcing ghetto values . . ." Here we notice the remarkable arrogance of a white boy who had become secure with his definition of blackness, and now comes down on nigguhs for being nigguhs, for their attendance to those values unsanctioned by his belief system. Unmistakably, there is a "mass appeal" in black works, but it has nothing to do with *entertainment*; and rather than "ghetto values," those traits and attitudes are being reinforced that reflect our continuity with a life-style that has its origin in Africa. Further, Gottfried truly assumes a paternalistic posture when he presumes that the sophistication of black experience must necessarily be defined in accordance with white sensibilities.

"The Black Theatre is not Lincoln Center," Clayton Riley [3] retorts, "that gleaming fortress of second-rateness that stands in full-dress tribute to this nation's deathless commitment to plasticism and battered sensibilities. And the Black Theatre is not Broadway—the safe haven of quick buck ideologists, commanders-in-chief of the nation's lost and drifting spirit, who direct the collective sense of what is still stubbornly referred to as taste." The black theater is a Spirit House where the collected energies of black people coalesce to define their peculiarly humanistic place in a ravaged society. It is a place where one's uniqueness unfolds and provides revelations about one's existence, revelations that cannot be given over to the scrutiny of a system of values that socially alienates one, and that is inconsistent with traditional sensibilities. Exclusion from the mainstream cess pool is, Riley observes, "right now (our) salvation from the dry-rot of America's banditry and killer ethic, from its shriveled soul and lack of style." And should the black theater be able to sustain itself against the pressures of economic imperatives, "it may be able to do its part in symbolically murdering the beast lurking beneath this country's expanding hard hat." Rastus has peeped massa's hole card and is convinced that whitey is holding a bogus hand.

Until recently, it was difficult to truly authenticate the black theater because the black experience was constantly being defined in sociological terms. Sociological method allows whites an easy handle on the descriptive life of blacks. Thus, having bought the pre-packaged image, many black artists ignored the forces of life and found themselves scraping the bottom of the slice-of-life bag for pieces of the black experience to authenticate—perhaps for sentimental reasons—our existence. The resulting product was often a eunuch's simulacrum of white culture which, as Imamu Baraka teaches, is "at best, corny." We are entertained, perhaps, but we learn nothing, since the spirit remains frozen, the potency of our being seldom ignited, much less regenerated. The spiritual release required to reveal the mode is subverted by mechanical manipulation of the content of black experience. Form, as understood by Western standards, locks the spirit into a box in order to suppress the emergence of a vision that might be too potent to handle; content then becomes subordinate to its almost anal-sphincter control.

If an event is to have dramatic force and verity, it requires the psychic/physical energies of all assembled —as in the ritual of a voodoo ceremony—to be fused into a dynamic unity so as to mutually achieve a spontaneous suspension of disbelief. Black people, owing to African continuity, are not spectators by nature; they are participators. The images created in an event gain in spiritual and physical potency through active participation in the mode.

There was no way for us to step outside of Gil Moses's production if Imamu Baraka's *Slave Ship*.[4]

The event was suspended in time, our entire viscera responding to the urgency conjured up to survive the trip across the Middle Passage. We struggle with the bruthas and sistas in the ship's hold, gritting our teeth as we move through images of future harassments that will come with oppression; the present future, and past, all locked into a mode of terrifying aggressions. And there is no way out, save the tenacity of ancestral spirit which desperately attempts to focus the mode through Song, Dance, and Drum so that we might maintain our Muntuness, our very humanity despite pressures of inimical forces. Having ritualized the mode, each agony evolving rhythmically out of the primary source of the event—the slave ship—Moses was able to heighten our sensitivity to the context of oppression without duplicating the experience in a static representation of reality, as in a natural-life photograph; instead he relied upon our input, our responses to inform the spirit of outrage. This is truly a case in which the director produced more than might be apparent, without discrediting the author, in the limitations of a linearly developed script.

The playwright, however brilliant, operates with a handicap, since from the moment he jots down the first word, he has cheated the participants—players and audience—of their natural inclination to mutually inform the urgency of the event, thereby inhibiting their spiritual freedom. However limited, if he is doing the job, and struggling for dramatic synthesis and the rest, he should indicate as clearly as possible those motivating references in the language of his culture that will spur the spontaneous interaction between players and audience that invokes in the theater a mutual concretization of black experience.

While participation inspires much of black life, there are very few theatrical exercises that can, at least completely reach the ecstatic freedom found in the religious experience. The theater is recognized as a secular edifice that, even from the outside, impedes the fullest expansion of the consciousness that might liberate the spirit's wisdom. In the church, the preacher may represent the focal point around which all events are created. However, at any given moment during the ceremonial exercise, any member of the congregation may exude an excess of Nommo, claim the Spirit, and initiate a change of focus in the event. This person commands center stage; and it will be given because of the congregation's intentions to reveal the full force of the event. However, from the moment we enter the theater, irrespective of the care taken to conceal its non-divine, mechanized superstructure in such a way that it is brought into a continuous experiential field, our senses become locked into the artificiality of the mode. The artifice is the first force, contextually speaking, that must be overcome: if the rituals presented in the house are strong enough to wrench us from our ennui, we will accept the totality of the event, and immerse ourselves in the womb of the spirit.

Thus, Barbara Ann Teer has elected to define her actors as *liberators:* perhaps in the seventies we will refer to the audience as *participators* and, without challenging the validity of Miss Teer's designation, the actors, *activators.* And if the roles are reversible from time to time, so much the better. Though we accept the fact that the artist has a special acuity for dramatic events, we do not consider his grasp of reality to be more *refined* than the *participators'* his senses are simply honed, tuned, cultivated to reach a higher level, just as the bricklayer, shoemaker, and farmer practice their skills at a higher level of achievement than a layman can. Since the theater can never be more than a secondary experience of rality, we depend upon the theater artist, the *activator,* to achieve a balance between disciplined innovations and subtle channels for spontaneity. His task is not to report daily life, but to elevate the symbols of that life in a manner that avoids offending the senses with prosaic reassessments of *natural* life that induce the temporary sensation of sentimentality. Melodrama is a nuisance! A vehicle should be sought that allows the experience to be confirmed by the intuition of the *participators,* be it uh-huh, a finger-pop, or a muted howl, so as to achieve totality. Perhaps then, theater, as a secondary experience, will influence our primary experience: LIFE.

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*From Paul Carter Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* (New York: Grove Press, 1972). Reprinted by permission of the author.

*Quoted in Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* from John S. Mbiti *African Religion and Philosophies* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1970).

*Barbara Ann Teer

1. Locke, loc. cit.

2 Gottfried, loc. cit.

3 Riley, loc. cit.

4 Imamu Baraka's Slave Ship, produced by the Chelsea Theater in January 1970, under the modally conceived direction of Gilbert Moses.

*Muntuness: Muntu is one of the four universal forces—the other being Kintu, Hantu, and Kuntu— described by German ethnologist Johnheinz Jahn in his study of Bantu logic. Muntu includes all intelligence; all human beings, spirits, certain trees and God.

A Tribute To Beauty

Echoing Presence

The warmth that comes in knowing
you, is like that of the bright life
giving Sun
Your everflowing warmth causes our
hearts to grow with a better
understanding of ourselves as men
Black men
You as black women
Black, as the spiritual, mental
and physical truth
Yes, you cause such vibrant
repetitious actions about and in US
Cause as black women you are
abouth warmth, like that of the life
giving Sun
You know, We Know and believe
It is your full beauty we brothers
honor and seek to make known
to the world.

It isn't right, not being able to
look at your face anymore ----------so
far away
Traveling gets me so down, and lonely
roads seem like they're never ending on time
Black women you are that dream to
be found
Reaching for you hasn't been easy
It took time to free darkened
processed minds
But each phase of that reaching
has brought US back, allowed US
to say It's more than nice being here
with you
Nile river moments in times passed
Making each phase more bearable
As each phase moves by your strength
and ours become one
It has been life itself, you are the
Seed of life

Radiant Smooth Dark Rays
Moving forever gentle between
the Light
Endless rows of eternal plight
move with me my queen
Confusion, frustration shed we too
Understanding, being fully aware what
we as two can do
move with me my queen
Steadfast voices of secure direction
drawing forth respect-love, Love-effection
Easing one anothers fears, love-effection so near
move with me, you move me my queen
you move me radiant Black Dove . . .

Richard Griffin

Dedication:

We are the Black Aesthetic

We are the Black Aesthetic
The Sounds and memories
of eons of spiritual harmony
comprised as a unity.
An entity within the realms of
a phenomenal light source
As you acknowledge our substance
Use us-to guide your strengths,
And desperse of our weaknesses

We are the Black Aesthetic
The growing voices of the yearlings
eager to add to the memories of
Spiritual harmony.

Our already ever growing energies
Are the spices of "Blueness" itself
As the sun does not shine we become
the proud bearers of a noble
absence of light
And our images become visual pictures of reality,
on the soul-less shadows of an alien humanity
Look to us for direction and comfort
For our voices and melodies will always-
Be Heard . . . . . .

Clyde Santana

Acknowledgements

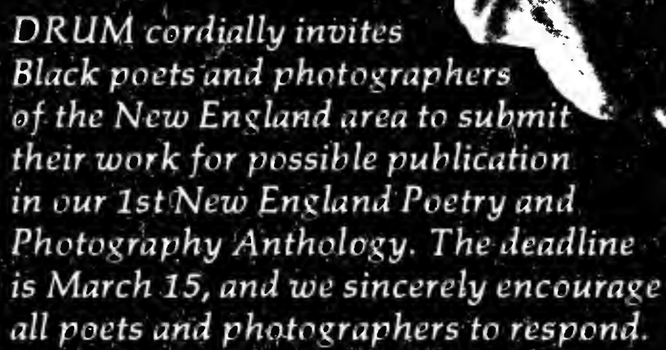
The DRUM staff would like to personally thank:

Literary:
- Paul Carter Harrison
- Archie Shepp

Poetry:
- Sonia Sanchez
- Richard Griffin
- Bill Hasson
- Tenajol Cormier
- Larry Darby
- Mungu Kimya Abudu

Art & Photography:
- Simone Gouvener 9, 38,
- Napoleon Henderson 32,
- James Henson 27, 37, 17, 10,
- Nelson Stevens - Centerfold

The DRUM magazine expresses its extreme appreciation for the use of the above individuals, creative, photographic and literary materials, We consider their efforts to be of an outstanding quality during a time when re-organization, evaluation and selection of proficiently executed work is of a dire necessity. It must be the total collective goal of educating and re-orienting our people in attempting to elevate their sensitivities towards re-discovering and appreciating the exellence so prevalent in the origins of our rich and vibrant cultural traditions.


DRUM cordially invites
Black poets and photographers
of the New England area to submit
their work for possible publication
in our 1st New England Poetry and
Photography Anthology. The deadline
is March 15, and we sincerely encourage
all poets and photographers to respond.

DRUM

Printing: Gazette Printing Co., Inc., Northampton, Mass.

DRUM